



The Indian EXPRESS

JOURNALISM OF COURAGE
SINCE 1932

FRIDAY, JULY 21, 2023, MUMBAI, LATE CITY, 18 PAGES

₹5.00 • WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

21 years after he crossed border, challenged man returns to home in Bangladesh

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PUNE, JULY 20

TWO DAYS before Eid (June 29), the family of M Rahman, 36, waited eagerly at the Phulbari road crossing on the India-Bangladesh border, to meet Rahman who had been missing since the last 21 years.

Rahman, diagnosed with schizophrenia, wandered away from his home in Bangladesh in 2002. He is being reunited with his family through the efforts of Karjat-based Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation which has been working for the cause of mentally ill and destitute wandering individuals since

the last three decades.

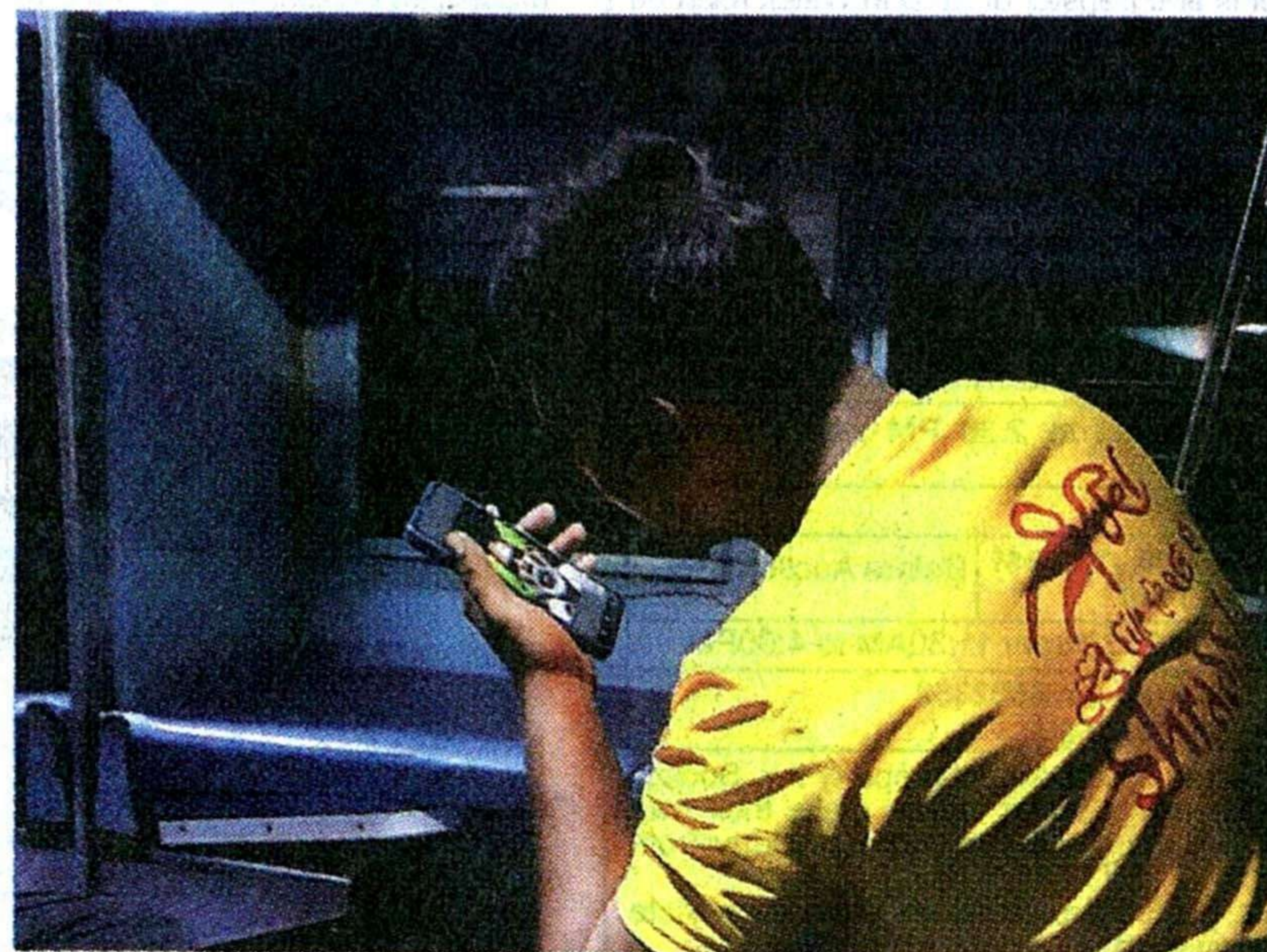
While last month's meeting could not take place due to missing paperwork, the much anticipated union is expected to take place on July 21 with Rahman on his way to New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal from where Phulbari is a few kilometres away. "Mein khush hoon (I am very happy)," said Rahman who is aboard a train to West Bengal and accompanied by members of the foundation including social worker Nitish Sharma and associate psychiatrist Dr Swarali Kondwilkar.

The foundation has helped to reunite more than 10,000 individuals with their families across far-flung villages and managed to contact Rahman's family

across the border, which had given up all hope of him being alive.

"This may not be the first instance of a mentally-challenged person wandering away from home, in the country or across the border, but it is a pioneering and heartwarming effort from multiple authorities who have helped in reuniting the family with the son," said noted psychiatrist Dr Bharat Vatwani, and founder trustee of the foundation which has a 6.5 acre plot shelter in Karjat and takes in more than 120 mentally ill and destitute individuals at a time. Foundation members found Rahman on the roadside in 2019.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Rahman continued to



Rahman reassures his father via a WhatsApp call during his train journey that he is okay and returning home

stay at the facility and showed good progress, Dr Kondwilkar said. Social worker Nitish Sharma played his part in finding and identifying Rahman. "We saw him sitting by the roadside holding a newspaper and was totally silent," Sharma says. "He was incoherent and since I speak Bengali, I could develop a rapport with him. It took several months. He would lapse into a different dialect of Bengali spoken in the regions on the border of West Bengal," he added.

An event organised by the Ahmednagar-based NGO, Snehalaya offered the first ray of hope for a possible family reunion. Around 150 youngsters participated in a 75-day cycle rally on October 2, 2021. The rally

was held to celebrate 50 years of Bangladesh's independence. "A function was held on August 15, 2022 to felicitate the youth and Raha Naba Kumar Das, Director of Gandhi Ashram Trust, Noakhali, Bangladesh," says Dr Girish Kulkarni, head of Snehalaya. Sharma, who attended the event wanted to ascertain whether Rahman was from Bangladesh and met Bangladeshi student volunteers and media personnel. Multiple video calls later, contact was established with Rahman's family. The father, Sahidul Islam, 63, informed them that his son had a history of mental illness and had disappeared in 2002.

"Unfortunately, no treatment was taken for the mental illness

by the family in Bangladesh. Rahman suffered from chronic schizophrenia, and would relapse into catatonic silence or self-talking and grimacing," Dr Vatwani remembers.

"We could not celebrate Eid together as my son could not cross the border due to lack of documents. There will be many more occasions to celebrate now that my son is coming home," says an ecstatic Islam, a retired army corporal, while speaking with *The Indian Express* on a WhatsApp call. Rahman has boarded the Jnaneswari Express from Kalyan headed towards Kolkata's Shalimar station. Rahman will catch another train to New Jalpaiguri and finally travel to Phulbari.